Frank O'Hara: Friendship and 'Personism'

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Abstract

This paper is a short study about the American post-modern poet, Frank O'Hara. As an anti-academic poet, his poetry is embedded with materials and associations like movie stars of the twentieth and the thirtieth, the daily social activities, jazz music, telephone calls of his friends, and any other daily incidents that can hardly fit inclusion into the poetry of the other poets.

The study falls into three sections and a conclusion. Section One deals with O'Hara's position within the new American avant-garde of the post-war. The function of poetry, according to O'Hara, is stressed here along with extracts from his own poetry that reject and contradict that function. In the second section, the principles of friendship and coterie are discussed where friendship can be discerned everywhere throughout O'Hara's poetry, and his poems seem full of friends, while the last section studies the poet's 'manifesto' that he called 'Personism'. The study closes with brief notes about the conclusions arrived at from this work and finally the list of references is shown.

المستخلص

هذه دراسة قصيرة عن الشاعر الاميركي ما بعد الحداثوي فرانك اوهارا. يصنف شعر اوهارا على انة ضد الاكاديمية فهو يمتلي بصور وترابطات مجازية من وحي الثقافة الشعبية للقرن العشرين. تقع الدراسة في ثلاث مباحث وخاتمة. يعالج المبحث الاول مكانة اوهارا في الشعر الطليعي الاميركي بعد الحرب. اما المبحث الثاني فيدرس قوة حضور الصداقة والحلقات في شعر اوهارا. يدرس المبحث الثالث ما يسمية اوهارا باعلانة عن الشخصانية. تلخص الخاتمة ابرز ما توصلت له الدراسة.

I. O'Hara and the American avant-garde world

Frank O'Hara (1920-1966) was one of the post-modern American poets who were associated with the New York school of the American poetry. The works of the group, like the other poetic movements of the

age, were characterized by an anti-academic style and took their subject matters from gossips heard in parties, coffee shops or gatherings, lives of movie characters and friendship matters.

As the leading character of the New York school, he summarizes the function of poetry in a way that it makes it at odds with whatever functions that were assigned for the delicate art previously. "The objective of poetry" he writes," is to reveal. It is not to teach, to advertise, not to see, not even to communicate…. but to reveal" (Qtd in Gray, 2004:646). But this declaration could not be taken on its surface meaning since in some poems, he not only communicates but also teaches and even sometimes takes the position of moral or religious character who shows his audience the correct thing to be done ; thus contradicting the very function of poetry that he set for it. Here are lines from his "Ave Maria":

Mothers of America

Let your kids go to the movies!

Get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to

It's true that fresh air is good for the body

But what about the soul

That grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images.

(Ferguson, 2005:1730)

O'Hara shared a common poetic aesthetic with his colleagues in the School which regards the surface of the poem as a field on which the physical energy of the poet could operate without any special interest in metaphors or symbols. This concept, necessarily, links him with Charles Olson (1910-1970) who wrote a manifesto called "projective Verse" and with William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972) who stressed the importance of musical rhythm and considered poetry as a field of action.

II. Coterie and Friendship

If one word should be mentioned in description of O'Hara's poetry that word should necessarily be 'friendship' because the major feature of most of his poetry is the presence of his pals and friends. He is actually the coterie poet, the champion of friendship and sociability. In this, no post-modern poet competes with him nor could such features be found elsewhere in the realm of poetry. The critic, George Acocella commenting on this aspect, writes:

> For O'Hara, the magic formula, the thing that liberated his personality and his poetry, was the mixing of art with friendship. When he finally came into his own, all his friends were artists, and their friendships were about art. Conversely, his poetry was full of his friends, and about their friendship. (Qtd in Epstein, 2006:86)

This mixing of art with friendship has come, clearly, as a natural consequence of the friendship he started in the university, since most of his friends there became prominent poets. The contradiction, however, is between this strong inclination towards camaraderie and a similar devotion to self-reliance and aloofness from the crowd. He seems to be pessimistic about a lasting connection with others. Although one critic describes his "celebration of friendship in poetry represented an ideal for later writers" (Lehman, 1998:87); yet it is hardly a celebration at all since he could not keep consistency in this respect. Taking his continuous movement and restlessness into consideration; one can hardly consider his idea of friendship as serious and lasting. When he mentions in one of his poems "my own ceaseless going" (Qtd in Epstein, 2006: 87), this should be a convenient evaluation not only for his identity, rather for his friendship as well.

This philosophy of movement seems to be firmly rooted in his character and consequently conveyed into his poetry. The philosophy is that it is dangerous if one feels that he has arrived at the stopping point because it simply means psychological death. Therefore, O'Hara insists, "I don't care how dark it gets, as long as we can still move" (Ibid: 88). This philosophy should not be taken with puzzlement because, after all, we are talking about America of the fifties, America of bohemianism, America of polarity: either mainstream and conformity or contradiction and aloofness. It is clear that for the bohemians, movement and only

movement counted along, may be, with aloofness from the mainstream society. As a result, O'Hara's 'friendship' should not have had a solid ground as far as consistency is concerned. In fact, he managed to exist among different and differing groups of literary circles and cooperated with them. The extraordinary point about him should have been his sociability and charisma that provided him access to so many characters including poets and painters. The critic John Gruen writes in this respect, "When Frank talked to you, he made you feel everything you did was of vital importance and interest—at least for the moment" (Ibid:176).

This interest in friendship, though it seems it was only temporary, has much to do with his poetry because it helped him to blur the thin line between friendships on the one hand and art and poetry on the other hand, especially that his friendship and collaboration were with artists. When he writes to a friend in poems like, "To a Poet" or "Ashes on Saturday Afternoon", it becomes clear that the relationship becomes intertwined with the subject, the form, and even the imagery of the poems. Here is an extract from "Ashes on Saturday Afternoon":

The banal machines are exposing themselves

On nearby hillocks of arrested color: why

If we are the anthropologists canope

Should this upset the autumn afternoon?

It is because you are silent. Speak, if

Speech is not embarrassed by your attention

To the scenery! In languages more livid than

Vomit on Sunday after wafer and prayer.

(www.fuzzjunk.blogspot.com)

The rate and range of his friendship can also be deduced from his self-exposition in which the real O'Hara can be seen. He seems to be following the Emersonian philosophy that sees the self as "not a state of being but a moment of change, say of becoming—a transience of being, a being of transience" (Cavell, 1988:111). He understands 'being' as ephemeral and rejects confining the self to limited categories, definitions and identities. These ideas can just be interpreted from his 'self' poems like the following one:

Now it is the 27th

Of this month

Which would have been my birthday

If I'd been born in it

But I wasn't

Would have made me

Scorpion

Which symbolizes silver, money, riches

Firm in aim, coldblooded in action…

Instead of

Cancer

Which symbolizes instability, suggestibility, sensibility.

(Qtd in Epstein, 2006: 94-5)

The poem tells us what O'Hara is not: firm in purpose, rich, and resolute in action; then it presents what he is, mainly non-stable. This feature could serve as a destructive factor for any evaluation of O'Hara's friendship as a lasting and distinctive phenomenon in his poetry. Since he does not hint at any nostalgia here, it is hard to assume that he might have hoped for 'scorpion'. Nevertheless, whether constant or ephemeral,

friendship remains attached closely to the poetry of 'the champion' of The New York School of poetry.

III. Personism

As a matter of fact, the academic poets of the 1940s avoided manifestos and consequently the anti-academic poets of the 1950s embraced this philosophy, may be, as a substitution for its negligence by their predecessors. Frank O'Hara should have become concerned about the situation of poetry that lost a great deal of its effect in the society due to the appearance of alternative sources of enrichment and entertainment. As a result he wrote his famous article, "Personism- a Manifesto" where he discusses subjects like the composition of his poetry and its reception along with his theory of poetry. In fact, the article can hardly rise to the level of manifesto and even some critics like Klein S. Jared regard it as a mock manifesto although other critics like Stephen Burt leap to O'Hara's defense and consider the article as a true manifesto. Burt and the other critics who agree with him defend their viewpoints by saying that all the literary manifestos are written to justify the poetry of the writers of those manifestos and it is the same with O'Hara. However, it is more sensible to call it a guideline to O'Hara's own poetry than a manifesto since it was not followed by any group of writers besides himself and consequently did not enough fame and popularity. This fact, however, should not degrade the article and its principles since O'Hara's poetry deserved such a guideline; otherwise it could not survive just because of the praise and judgment of a limited number of friends and colleagues.

In fact O'Hara's preoccupation with friendship that is explained briefly here, underlies the theory of poetry that he puts down in his manifesto. It is important to observe the close relationship between the origin of the new poetic 'movement' he claimed that he invented and his fascination with interpersonal friendship and love.

There are fascinating points about the controversial manifesto itself. First, the poet does not start with any definition for his manifesto; rather he starts with a self-defense against those critics who accused him of being confused. He begins with his idea about poetry and technical aspect in which he does not seem to believe: "I don't believe in god" he writes in the first part of his manifest, "so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structure" (Jared, 2010: 3). By this remark, he rids himself from the restrictions of poetic technicality and at the same time provides a

justification for the kind of poetry he produces. For him, writing poetry is no more than "just go on your nerve" (Ibid). This is exactly what he does in writing his poems like the following extract from "The Day Lady Died" which is one of his most famous and most anthologized poems:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday

Three days after Bastille day, yes

It is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine

Because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton

Npat 7:15 and then go straight to dinner

And I don't know the people who will feed me.

(Ferguson, 2005: 1728)

Whether this is poetry or not, according to our understanding is a different story, but the fact remains that Frank O'Hara is regarded as one of the distinguished poets of the post-modern American poetry and the founding father of the New York School of poetry in the middle of the fifties. His volume of poetry transcends five hundred pages and was given a considerable area in Donald Allen's famous anthology, The New American Poetry. This is usually taken as a tribute to any poet and Allen's anthology has become like a criterion for the greatness and importance of any poet in it.

Interestingly, he starts shedding light on his theory of poetry in the final section of his manifesto not in the beginning and even there, he avoids a clear definition of "Personism". This part, however, contains some 'principles' that he thinks should exist in poetry or more accurately, in his poetry. For him:

1. Poetry should mirror life in being emotive not logical.

2. Writing poetry should be instinctive and natural.

3. The poem should be addressed to somebody and not to be impersonal.

4. The poem is not an end product; rather it is a medium between the poet and the addressee.

O'Hara may not have been the first poet to call for such characteristics in post-modern American poetry except, may be, for its being addressed to a particular person and this is the core of his manifesto. Great American poets like William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) believed that poetry should be instinctive and a process rather than an end. These points could have prompted some critics to reject his article as a 'manifesto' and regard it as simply a mock manifesto or a parody one.

He seems actually confused in the article- manifesto because he does not follow a logical way even in arranging his ideas to propose an acceptable 'manifesto'. In the second part of the article, he talks about the reception of poetry which logically should have been in the last part. O'Hara believed that poetry was declining and painting was rising and so, as he thought, his contemporaries tried to amend their poetry in order to be more appealing and more understandable to the readers and audiences. This would bring poetry back to the interest of the readers. But he does not seem to agree to this thought, which he refers to repeatedly in different occasions, and so, surprisingly enough, writes in this part, "Poetry is not for everyone and therefore it is not necessary for everyone to understand its meaning" (Ramazani, 2003: 1702).

The quotation, undoubtedly, includes contradiction from the part of the writer since Personism does not mean elite at all and so the word 'everyone' seems quite misleading. Who are those 'persons' to whom his poems are addressed? If it is not necessary for 'everyone' to understand and cherish his poetry, why did not he use telephone instead of poetry to tell his friends what he wanted to, especially that before the idea of "Personism' could come to him, he thought that telephone could suffice for that purpose?

The great irony lies in the fact that his poems were published and even collected into volumes to be read by those 'everyone' whom he thought that it is not necessary for them to understand his poetry.

The case, however, is not so simplistic and there is more to O'Hara's poetry than what he confines to limited border with such restrictions. First of all, his poetry embraces spontaneity that was a kind of vogue for the American poets of the fifties and sixties. This spontaneity is the source of a true and original feeling of the poet at the moment of composing his

poetry which is an advantage and not disadvantage of course. In this respect, one critic writes:

> O'Hara's poetry disliked and disturbed theories of poetry but was in no way naïve about his own procedures, which result, in his best work, in a style of writing that somehow manages to fuse immediacy and excitement with a glamorous hyper-sophistication and extreme self-consciousness. (Bainbridge, 2012: 9)

Still about the reception of poetry; he seems to be careless whether or not his poetry is well-received because, after all, his poetry is addressed to specific persons. Concerning the readers, he writes, "nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them" (Ramazani, 2003: 1704). This serves the purpose of the idea of Personism that he chose for his manifesto, but at the same time it makes a difference between writing for specific persons and writing with the audience or readers in mind. In other words, it differentiates between the creation of poetry and its reception. Here, the point of interest is about the contents of the poem; what is said, what is supposed and what is left to be deduced. One is prompted to think that O'Hara's poetry needs a specific language that should be mutually understood between the writer and the receiver, while its meanings and messages remain foggy to the others.

Another intriguing point in the manifesto is O'Hara's insistence that 'Personism' does not have to do with personality and intimacy. This can be justified only if O'Hara's psyche is taken into consideration where a distance can be found between the poet and the other person. The poet puts forward a portion of his psyche and the reader has to penetrate into it through the lens of the poem itself. In this way both the intimacy and the Personism can be achieved. Here is an example from "A True account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island":

The sun woke me this morning loud

And clear, saying "Hey! I've been

Trying to wake you up for fifteen

Minutes. Don't be so rude, you are

Only the second poet I've ever chosen

To speak to personally.

(www.poemhunters.com)

Although O'Hara dismisses any possibility of the existence of intimacy in his poetry; it is hard to infiltrate into the mind of the poet and deduce what he was thinking about at the moment of writing such poems without a kind of closeness to it whether literal or imaginary. The principle of closeness and intimacy is at the heart of the manifesto itself when O'Hara writes:

> It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. (Ramazani, 2003: 1703)

A couple of notes are worthy to be stressed; first, the birth of the manifesto is related to friendship and intimacy with the black American poet, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and the second is his choice of the communication vie telephone. The importance of the telephone, here, is that it achieves the two contradictory requirements of intimacy and being away from intimacy at the same time. While in the telephone communication only two persons are involved and thus, intimacy is achieved; yet the distance between them may be great. So, his poetry, like the telephone call, is a means that achieves both close and at distance connections. This is, may be, one of the major features along with friendship that single Frank O'Hara's poetry out among the many post-war American poets.

Conclusion

Through his article and, in fact, throughout his rich-in-amount poetry, Frank O'Hara seems quite different among the post-modern American poets. His rejection of the well-known functions of poetry and adopting a new and unheard theory for poetry-it seems- secured him that special

position. His approach to poetry in general and even to his own poetry seems Dadaist.

The article that he calls "Personism- a manifesto" appears confusing and it seems to me that it is just a mock nomenclature for the many 'ism' movements of the modern and post-modern literature and art. The confusion- the study believes- stems from the poet's own confusion that should have been strongly connected to the bohemianism of the fifties and sixties. The nomenclature, therefore, can hardly meet the requirements of a movement though it suffices to justify O'Hara's poetry.

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